

Managing the Service's National Wildlife Refuge System

The State of our Refuges across the Southeast

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Wildlife Refuge System is developing a workforce plan to address declining budgets anticipated over the next three to five years. This effort will realign our workforce to more effectively meet mission priorities, achieve cross programmatic goals, bolster conservation at the landscape level, and strengthen our ability to achieve and maintain an operating margin of up to 20 percent for our refuges.

Regions	Permanent Full Time Positions	%
Region 1	311	9%
Region 2	513	14%
Region 3	495	13%
Region 4	748	20%
Region 5	401	11%
Region 6	542	15%
Region 7	303	8%
CNO	269	7%
Region 9	105	3%
Total:	3,687	100%

The need has never been more critical as we address natural resource challenges like the need to restore coastal wetlands along the Gulf Coast lost to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and opportunities we have such as the recovery of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker at the Cache River and White River National Wildlife Refuges.

The Service currently manages 128 national wildlife refuges, 97 of which are staffed with 748 people who manage nearly four million acres of refuge lands across the Southeast and a wide range of public use activities including hunting, fishing, crabbing, birding, and wildlife photography. One in five of the Service's refuge system employees are located in the Southeast Region, and one of every three visitors to a national wildlife refuge visits refuges in the Southeast Region.

The Southeast Region's refuge managers began to address declining budget trends three years ago when average operating margins had declined to roughly five percent. Through attrition from retirements, transfers, and promotions, 68 permanent positions – eight percent of the region's refuge workforce – have been eliminated since October, 2004. Today, more than half of the region's refuges have fewer than three staff members, and 43 refuges are completely unstaffed. This has helped Southeast Region refuge managers increase current average operating margins to roughly 14 percent, which includes operations and maintenance funds. However, the resulting changes to our workforce have occurred by chance rather than strategically.

The current path is unsustainable.

To maintain current staffing levels, southeast refuges will need at least \$2 million in annual increases. This is unlikely, and if we do nothing to address flat or declining budgets, by 2012, 103 percent of our annual operations funding will be dedicated to salaries.

Doing nothing is not an option. In an effort to realign our workforce to match up with mission related priorities and deal with anticipated flat or declining budgets, the Southeast Region has completed a detailed analysis and made management recommendations.

A Strategic Realignment

Two teams were established to identify ways to reduce costs at the Regional Office and at field stations. These teams were made up of refuge system employees with a wealth of experience and commitment to the Service and its conservation mission.

The Regional Office Team developed a plan to fulfill Service Director Dale Hall's May, 2006 request to shift 10 percent of its regional office budget

Location	Number of positions eliminated FY04-FY06	Current number of positions FY06	Number of positions to be eliminated FY07-FY09	Percent lost proposed for FY07-FY09
Regional Office*	4	68	8.5	13%
Alabama	3	33	3	9%
Arkansas	5	52	4	8%
Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands	1	27	2	7%
Florida	14	168	21	13%
Georgia	4	72	11	15%
Kentucky	0	4	0	0%
Louisiana	14	104	18	17%
Mississippi	5	67	3	4%
North Carolina	10	73	9	12%
South Carolina	5	37	4	11%
Tennessee	3	43	4	9%
Totals	68	748	87.5	12%

* positions will be eliminated from Regional Office by the end of FY2008.

to support conservation activities at the field level.

The Field Office Team developed a plan to reshape our workforce in order to more effectively focus on our highest priorities and ultimately move us closer to average operating margins of 20 percent at stations across the region. (over)



Collectively, these plans recommend the following:

- Prioritizing our refuges across the Southeast Region to more effectively meet the system's mission critical priorities designating focus refuges to highlight best management practices,
- Reorganizing seven refuges to new or existing refuge complexes, and
- Phasing out 87.5 positions—8.5 in the Regional Office and 79 at refuges. The positions will be abolished largely through retirements, voluntarily transfers, and, if approved, buy-outs and early retirements through VERA - VSIP to eligible employees. The least preferred option will be directed reassignments. There are no plans to request authority for a Reduction In Force (RIF).

So what does all of this really mean?

Cutting our workforce means we will be doing less work with less people in a number of activity areas:

Management

Prior to 2006, we abolished 16 refuge manager positions, and this plan calls for abolishing an additional 25 refuge managers (17% of positions in the Region). At **Roanoke River NWR in North Carolina**, this will result in half as much involvement in Federal Energy Relicensing Commission (FERC) agreements and coordination with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on river flow issues. At **Eufaula NWR in Alabama**, the loss of an assistant manager will reduce by half day-to-day management oversight of program activities at the refuge including hunting, law enforcement, facilities maintenance, and administration.

Visitor Services

Southeast refuges provide year-round visitor services at a variety of facilities designed to showcase wildlife treasures. The Southeast Region boasts the nation's highest visitation with more than 11 million visitors annually. Prior to 2006, the Southeast Region eliminated eight public-use professionals, and this plan calls for 12 more positions to be phased out. This greatly reduces our

capabilities to provide compatible wildlife-dependant recreation including hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, environmental education and interpretation.

At **Pelican Island NWR in Florida**, our nation's first national wildlife refuge, all active public outreach will be eliminated. At **Cross Creeks NWR in Tennessee**, environmental education programs reaching more than 2,000 local school children will be significantly scaled back. The refuge will no longer host the Stewart County Earth Camp and will eliminate some lottery hunts offered each year. The loss of two park rangers at **Okefenokee NWR in Georgia** will require the closure of that refuge's east entrance for two days a week resulting in significant declines in visitation. And at **J.N. "Ding" Darling NWR in Florida**, the loss of two park rangers will lead to the closure of its visitor center for two days a week and significantly reduce its environmental education programs impacting 55,000 school children.

Science and Conservation

The Southeast Region has already eliminated 17 biologist and biological science technician positions. Another six biologist positions have been identified in this strategic downsizing effort. As with other positions identified in this report, the impacts are substantive. At **A.R.M. Loxahatchee NWR in Florida** water quality monitoring and work to control invasives will decline by 25 percent further slowing progress on vital conservation challenges that impact the Everglades and the refuge's ability to comply with legal obligations and consent decree mandates. At **Mountain Longleaf NWR in Alabama**, the entire biological program, which supports three national wildlife refuges and affects more than 15 threatened and endangered species, will be eliminated.

Maintenance

The Southeast Region has already eliminated 15 maintenance positions and this plan identifies another 21 maintenance professionals - roughly 16% of those positions across the region. At the **Savannah Coastal**

NWR Complex where three maintenance positions will be lost, the degradation of expensive, essential marine equipment will be accelerated. In addition, its wildlife drive upon which 50,000 visitors travel each year will be closed, and wintering waterfowl impoundment management will be suspended.

Nearly three of every four positions identified for elimination over the next three years impact refuges in the top two refuge priority categories, which is indicative of the impact of previous staff reductions and the depth of budget expectations in the years ahead.

This workforce management plan will guide southeast refuges over the next three years. These steps are necessary to help the Service maintain its place as one of America's premier wildlife conservation agencies. These are difficult times. We are committed to our workforce, and how well we implement this plan will determine what flexibility we will have to address the needs we will face beyond 2009.